

Finding the University  
ROLLING HOME SHOW  
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This is the week when one of Fredericton's best-kept secrets leaks out. No, it's got nothing to do with mall construction, or with that mysterious, unnamed building down on Phoenix Square that's being rebuilt. This is something that happens every fall around this time. It's not the Frex, either.

You can see the secret leaking out on street corners. People pull their cars to the curb and just ask citizens walking along. You can tell that's what's happening because usually the cars contain one or two middle-aged people and a scared-looking late adolescent. Sometimes one of them is looking at an inadequate tourist map. The trunk of the car is often lashed down over a couple of huge suitcases, a stereo, maybe a guitar or some athletic equipment. The car often has out-of-province license plates.

The secret the people are asking about is the location of the university. The reason they're asking is that the kid in the car is a prospective freshman, and he's looking for a university to enroll in. They've probably been driving around for half an hour or so, and are beginning to wonder if this is the right city after all.

I used to think there was something wrong with all those people. I mean, everybody knows where the university is, right? I discovered that it wasn't quite so easy a couple of years ago when I helped organize a conference on campus, one that involved a lot of people driving in. I found out that finding the university is a lot harder than finding Fredericton.

If you come in from upriver on the Transcanada, for example, I can't see anything much to keep you from winding up in Maugerville. There's not a single sign suggesting how you might find a university. If you managed to count the Fredericton exits and take the last one, you'd be on Forest Hill (and if you were lucky you might have seen the Aitken Centre going by on the left, and know what general direction you had to head in). But from there you'd be on your own.

If you were on the way from Saint John, I can't imagine what you'd do without a map: when you got to Regent Street you might come into the CBC and ask the receptionist. Coming in from the south – from New Maryland – it's the same story. If you were lucky you might go on down Regent and notice the small, dignified, restrained white sign at the corner of College Hill – but you might wind up down at City Hall or the Regent Street Wharf, too: there are lots of signs for those. Or the hospital, from trying to drive down Regent and search for signs at the same time.

Coming in from across the river, from the Nashwaak and the Miramichi, you'd have no help at all. If you happened to know that the university was all red brick – and wasn't right on the river – you might see it from the Westmoreland Street Bridge. Then, if you had a little orienteering experience, you might fight your way across town in its general direction.

The only people who seem to get any help are the ones coming in the Transcanada from the east. There are no signs for the university as such, but there are three small blue notices about the Aitken Center, and if you didn't roll your car over trying to make that last sudden hairpin curve onto College Hill Road, you'd probably find the university okay.

It's strange. Many cities seem to recognize that a large proportion of their out-of-town traffic is bound for universities, and they signpost them adequately. Not only that, some of them, like Sackville, seem actually proud to have the university there, and put it right on their welcome signs. I've seen towns in Indiana that were that proud of having branches of Devry Tech.

Maybe Fredericton knows something about the university that it's not letting out. Something besides its location, that is.

Russ Hunt, For the Rolling Home Show.